Huckleberry Finn

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EACH nation has its own ideals of conduct. Huckleberry Finn is an example of the American hero who, unhampered by any prejudice, experiences life fully, and lives by a personal code of conduct, without reference to the judgements of society. While the code is undefined, its main characteristics are the primacy of personal moral judgements, a belief in the equality of man, and a distrust of society as erecting barriers against, or corrupting, the free movement of the spirit. This absolute internalization of moral values is peculiarly American. It is just the opposite of the paradigm offered by Jane Austen in *Mansfield Park,* where religion governs morals, morals govern conduct, and conduct governs manners, with the result that a person's spiritual worth may be assessed from his habits and social behaviour. It is also unlike the determinism found in the novels of George Eliot or Thomas Hardy.

Huckleberry Finn is a spiritual autobiography. Its main themes are the development of Huck's acceptance of Jim as an equal:

> It was fifteen minutes before I could work myself up to go and humble myself to a nigger — but I done it, and I warn't ever sorry for it afterwards, neither. I didn't do him no more mean tricks, and I wouldn't done that one if I'd a knowed it would make him feel that way.

and his willingness to be rejected by society and risk damnation so that Jim may escape:

> And then think of *me*! It would get all around, that Huck Finn helped a nigger to get his freedom; and if I was to ever see anybody from that town again, I'd be ready to get down and lick his boots for shame.
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> 'All right, then, I'll *go* to hell' — and tore it up. It was awful thoughts, and awful words, but they was said. And I let them stay said; and never thought no more about reforming. I shoved the whole thing out of my head; and said I would take up wickedness again, which was in my line, being brung up to it, and the other warn't. And for a starter, I would go to work and steal Jim out of slavery again.

The *persona* of Huckleberry Finn, with its seeming naiveté and implied ironies at the expense of those supposedly more sophisticated

or educated, has its roots in regional American folk humour. The uniqueness of the novel results from the bringing together of spiritual autobiography with the comic strategies of the American tall tale. It is this combination, with the folk element setting the tone, which creates the main character and narrator of the story whose words structure our response.

The importance of the journey in *Huckleberry Finn* is not just the structural support which it provides for the stringing together of events; the journey down the river on the raft is the American equivalent of the journey of moral education found in European literature. The archetype of the journey is the traditional allegory of the soul's pilgrimage through this world. The journey is always an individual task or at best shared with a few companions. Whereas in the European novel the use of an orphan or foundling allows the author to create a character without social roots who can try on identities and experience life to the fullest, *Huckleberry Finn* gives this literary tradition a new direction. Huck travels socially downward, away from Miss Watson to the company of Jim, and away from society to the raft, as a necessary process of his spiritual education.

Civilization, as represented by the Mid-West with its church-going, elementary book-learning and middle-class manners, is shown as restrictive, and against the free play of spirit: 'but it was rough living in the house'; 'living in a house, and sleeping in a bed pulled on me pretty tight'. When Huck sleeps in the woods: 'That was a rest to me.' In his old clothes he is 'free and satisfied'. In his new clothes he feels 'all cramped up'. When the widow rings the bell for supper 'you had to come'. 'You couldn't go right to eating'. 'Dont put your feet up there, Huckleberry.' 'Dont scrunch up like that.' 'Dont gap and stretch.' 'Why don't you try to behave.' 'She kept pecking at me, and it got tiresome and lonesome.' Huck's father may be cruel and terrifying, but Huck feels more at ease with him in the woods than in civilization: 'It was kind of lazy and jolly, laying off comfortable all day, smoking and fishing, and no books nor study . . . It was pretty good times up in the woods there.'

There is a significant parallel between Jim's relation to civilization and Huck's. Both are outcasts, without social roots. Huck 'lights out' whenever civilization becomes too confining. Jim 'lit

out' as soon as he suspects he is to be sold down the river. Huck's wish to be free of any entanglements is paralleled by Jim's: 'I owns myself'. Slavery is the main symbol of the relation of the individual to society, slavery being an undeniable instance of restraint in contrast to natural freedom.

Civilization in *Huckleberry Finn* seems to prevent any spontaneous love of others. Class, money, race and decorum inhibit or corrupt natural feelings. The lack of charity towards others found in civilization (in contrast to the tolerance Jim and Huck feel towards almost everyone) is illustrated by slavery and the selling of human beings. This motif occurs in various transformations during the novel. Miss Watson considers selling Jim down the river, and Tom plays tricks on him. When Tom has used Jim for his adventures at Aunt Sally's he 'give Jim forty dollars for being prisoner for us so patient'. The king and the duke offer a parallel to such attitudes by selling the Wilks's slaves and betraying Jim. Civilization seems to consist of cruelties perpetrated upon others, whether to inculcate manners, to establish one's dignity, for financial gain, or simply from malice. The Grangerfords and Shepherdsons kill in cold blood. The cruel treatment of animals by the loafers in Arkansas reveals a similar callousness at a lower level of society. Their idea of fun is 'putting turpentine on a stray dog and setting fire to him, or tying a tin pan to his tail and see him run himself to death'. Sherburn's shooting of Boggs and the attempt to lynch Sherburn are both aspects of the same society. (Jim, if he had been caught, would have been lynched the night Huck disappeared.)

The contrast between conventional pieties and Huck's innate, untutored moral sense is Twain's central irony:

> I went and told the widow about it, and she said the thing a body could get by praying for it was 'spiritual gifts'. This was too many for me, but she told me what she meant — I must help other people, and do everything I could for other people, and look out for them all the time, and never think about myself. This was including Miss Watson, as I took it. I went out in the woods and turned it over in my mind a long time, but I couldn't see no advantage about it — except for the other people — so at last I reckoned I wouldn't worry about it any more, but just let it go.
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> And when she got through, they all just laid theirselves out to make me feel at home and know I was amongst friends. I felt so ornery and

low down and mean, that I says to myself, My mind's made up; I'll hive that money for them or bust.

Compare Huck's reaction to the tar and feathering of the king and duke,

I was sorry for them poor pitiful rascals, it seemed like I couldn't ever feel any hardness against them any more in the world. It was a dreadful thing to see. Human beings *can* be awful cruel to one another.

with

'Good gracious! Anybody hurt?'
'No'm. Killed a nigger.'
'Well, it's lucky; because sometimes people do get hurt.'

The spontaneous concern for others, without hope of reward, is, it seems, only found in those outside society, such as Huck and Jim. Jim would rather be caught than not send for a doctor to help Tom. The doctor, however, is less concerned with his patients than with keeping Jim captive:

I had a couple of patients with the chills, and of course I'd of liked to run up to town and see them, but I dasn't, because the nigger might get away, and then I'd be to blame.

There is a difference between *Huckleberry Finn* and most English or European novels of spiritual growth. In European novels the young boy would mature and eventually take his place in society. He would become wiser, be converted, assimilated, initiated, and develop from adolescence to manhood. Huck does not grow up. He is not assimilated into society, nor does he find his spiritual fulfilment in a church, ideology or woman. He remains isolated and alone, young, longing to go West. Bringing standards of the European novel to *Huckleberry Finn* would require us to say that the lack of resolution shows the immaturity of Twain's vision, since he cannot imagine a future for Huck. But the European novel has its own standards, according to which man belongs in society and must find his place, although the place may not at first be apparent. Twain's vision is more pessimistic. There is no place in society for Huck. He must reject society if he is to avoid the infringements upon the spirit found in those who are 'civilized'. There is no society where Huck will be left in peace with his moral innocence, natural spiritual gifts, and his lack of concern for the status which goes with cultural acquisitions.

When Huck speaks of going West at the end of the novel, it is a rejection of the encroachment of Europe into the American heartland. In terms of American cultural history it represents the desire to find in the West a new Eden, a state of innocence which the pilgrim fathers had sought in the New World. Civilization is the opposite of this. The middle-class respectability of Aunt Sally from which Huck flees is the serpent in the garden. It is the temptation to rebuild Europe in the New World.

The implied criticism of Europe exists upon various levels. The most obvious satire is the many barbs directed at Sir Walter Scott's romances. It would be a mistake to see this as merely an attack on another literary tradition. It is European culture as represented by Scott which is Twain's target. Tom Sawyer, carried away by historical romances, keeps planning escapades which have no basis in reality:

> We used to hop out of the woods and go charging down on hog-drovers and women in carts taking garden stuff to market, but we never hived any of them. Tom Sawyer called the hogs 'ingots', and he called the turnips and stuff 'julery' and we would go to the cave and pow-wow over what we had done and how many people we had killed and marked. But I couldn't see no profit in it.

Tom's sensibility has been so influenced by a romantic view of European history that he can speak of murder and kidnapping without any awareness of their moral implications.

The indignities to which Tom subjects Jim have a specific thematic function. Whereas Huck makes a moral decision to risk his body and soul to save Jim, Tom sees Jim's captivity as an excuse for adventures. That Tom knows Jim has been set free does not justify his callousness at the expense of Jim's health and feelings. The difference between Huck and Tom is not merely between two personalities; it is between two ethics, two ways of life. Huck, travelling without any cultural baggage, embodies the Puritan ethic as it is found in the New World, with its sense of isolation, desire for self-sufficiency and emphasis on personal moral choice. European culture, as represented by literature, stimulates Tom's imagination, but breeds no knowledge of what is useful or what is morally right.

It may at first seem surprising that *Huckleberry Finn* includes a conscious rejection of Europe; but if we look at the novel

carefully, we see that Europe comes into it very often. The king and duke, with their spurious titles and pretended cultural knowledge, represent what Europe has become in the New World. They present a parallel to the conventional social and religious pieties of Miss Watson and Aunt Sally. The king and duke almost get away with their swindles because of the respect given by provincial Americans to supposed representatives of Europe. Twain is, of course, mocking the provincialism of American society; but the mockery is not directed at those who lack a better knowledge of European civilization. It is directed at the ready acceptance of anything which smacks of culture:

> Uncle Silas he had a noble brass warming-pan which he thought considerable of, because it belonged to one of his ancesters with a long wooden handle that come over from England with William the Conqueror in the *Mayflower* or one of them early ships and was hid away up garret with a lot of other old pots and things that was valuable, not on account of being any account because they warn't, but on account of them being relicts, you know.

Some of the episodes which at first seem unrelated to the main story also offer illustrations of the effect of Europe on America. Colonel Sherburn's cold-blooded killing of Boggs is an example of a feudal code of honour which leads to moral stupidity. Though Sherburn has an undeniable dignity, our response to the shooting is assured by the screams of Boggs's daughter. The Shepherdson-Grangerford feud is another example of European codes of honour continuing in the South. Twain is explicit about this. Colonel Grangerford is a gentleman. 'He was well born.' The Grangerfords and Shepherdsons are both described as 'aristocracy'. They are not products of the frontier. An ironic contrast is provided when Jim calls Huck 'de on'y white genlman dat ever kep' his promise to ole Jim'. Of course not every representative of civilization in *Huckleberry Finn* is corrupt or amoral. Widow Douglas and Aunt Sally are well-intentioned and, as Huck says, they mean no harm.

Just as Twain admired *Don Quixote* for sweeping medieval chivalry out of existence, so Huck's journey is a Quixotic voyage through American cultural landscape, with Jim taking the part of Sancho Panza:

I told Jim all about what happened inside the wreck, and at the ferry-boat; and I said these kinds of things was adventures; but he said he didn't want no more adventures.

It lays in de way Sollermun was raised. You take a man dat's got on'y one er two chillen; is dat man gwyne to be waseful o' chillen? No, he ain't; he can't 'ford it. *He* know how to value 'em. But you take a man dat's got 'bout five million chillen runnin' roun' de house, en it's diffunt. *He* as soon chop a chile in two as a cat. Dey's plenty mo'. A chile er two, mo' er less, warn't no consekens to Sollermun, dad fetch him!

'Well,' says he, 'dat's all right, den. I doan' mine one er two kings, but dat's enough.'

Twain's complete rejection of what has been described above as the European cultural tradition can best be seen in the language of *Huckleberry Finn*. The spelling errors, the regional idioms, the poor grammar and general air of semi-literacy, are not mere cleverness. The impersonation of Huck may be a *tour de force* of style, showing the possibilities of a realistic use of the American language, but it also involves a conscious rejection of imitation English writing. To come to *Huckleberry Finn* after reading earlier American literature is like being relieved of a burden, a burden of fine writing, swollen cadences, circumlocutions, long sentences, a certain pomposity. The burden is English prose of the previous two and a half centuries. It is the same burden which was willingly carried by Henry James and rejected by Hemingway. The difference is between a style which attempts to place man in society and make minute observations on such relationships, and a style which reveals what is capable of articulation in those who feel instinctively alienated from the processes and values of society. *Huckleberry Finn* is not, as are the fictions of Jane Austen and George Eliot and Thomas Hardy, a book which grows from the soil of a rich organic culture, closely observed. One notices its lack of texture in comparison to the English novel. Words appear not to carry weight or imply judgements; observed social relations are few and lacking dimension. There is a texture but it is thin, open, and lighter in tone than that of the English novel. It is a texture recognizable in Hemingway's novels and in American painting, where the European tradition of the master artist has been rejected for the appearance of spontaneity and integrity of the self. The way *Huckleberry Finn* begins, with its

bad grammar and mockery of Twain's own fiction, is a conscious affront to standards of decorum and high seriousness, which for Twain are part of the heritage of Europe in America.

With our tolerance for youth and rebellion and with our suspicion of civilization, we find Huck modern and contemporary. But this is to assimilate him too easily, just as tolerance for the unconventional and rebellious has to some extent been assimilated into modern culture as a life style without any understanding of what opting out really means. The school teachers who banned *Huckleberry Finn* from school libraries, and the mothers who felt it was not a fit book for their children, were on the right track. They felt the way in which *Huckleberry Finn* is an affront to society, a condemnation of the value of education and social conditioning. They understood, if only half consciously, the affront meant to good upbringing and good behaviour by the approval Twain gives Huck and by Twain's choice of language. They were quite right to see the novel as somehow subversive, in some way undermining their own aims and objectives in life and what they wished their children to become. Huckleberry Finn is not Tom Sawyer, he is not an imaginative youth destined for the bourgeoisie. He is a rebel with a cause. The cause is to get out of society as fast and as completely as possible for his own ease of mind. The text is clear: 'I got to light out for the Territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me and sivilize me and I can't stand it. I been there before.'

Twain is not a representative of that populist strain of American culture which idolizes the uneducated and the common man. Huck's father illustrates the degeneration of the frontier tradition into populist attitudes:

> I'll learn people to bring up a boy to put on airs over his own father and let on to be better'n what *he* is. You lemme catch you fooling around that school again, you hear? Your mother couldn't read, and she couldn't write, nuther, before she died. None of the family couldn't, before *they* died. *I* can't; and here you're a-swelling yourself up like this.
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> They call that a govment that can't sell a free nigger till he's been in the State six months. Here's a govment that calls itself a govment, and let's on to be a govment, and thinks it is a govment, and yet's got to set stock-still for six whole months before it can take ahold of a prowling, thieving, infernal, white-shirted free nigger.

While Twain shares with the populist tradition a distrust of Europe, respectability, culture and breeding, the common man doesn't emerge with any honours in *Huckleberry Finn*. After Boggs is shot people begin pushing and shoving to see the body: 'Say, now, you've looked enough, you fellows; 'taint right and 'taint fair, for you to stay thar all the time, and never give nobody a chance; other folks has their rights as well as you'. The louts, layabouts and lynch mobs which inhabit the villages along the Mississippi are morally inferior to those who are respectable and educated. The radical rejection of society in *Huckleberry Finn* does not permit any American equivalent to the nostalgia found in the English novel for an older organic community. Huck, isolated, uncorrupted, true to himself, could never be assimilated into any society.

Anglers

First memories: a string tied
  to a stick of ash dangling
    in a dark pool — my fishing rod:
with this in hand I tried
  to be grown up, to do
    the useful things
      with which grown people filled their days.

But now, grown up, I cast a fly
  in the same stream, seeming
    dead-set on trout, — but mainly
escaping to my native sky
  from the drab round, to do
    the useless things
      with which my children fill their days.

EDWARD LOWBURY